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RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO NATIONAL OR ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

Letter dated 24 January 1994 from the Chargé d'affaires of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office at Geneva addressed to the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva

I have the honour to transmit herewith an address by Mr. Andrei Kozyrev, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, related to human rights of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia. The Minister expresses his particular concern at Latvia's new Law on local governing bodies which is of a discriminatory character on a purely ethnic basis with respect to several hundred thousand Russian-speaking people. The Russian side considers this Law as another evidence of aggressive nationalism threatening Latvia itself both with social tension and possible confrontation with neighbouring countries. The Minister believes that in such a serious situation the mechanism of preventive diplomacy must be used more actively to avoid unpredictable consequences.

I kindly ask you, Mr. Director-General, to issue the enclosed paper as an official document of the fiftieth session of the Commission on Human Rights under agenda item 18 "Rights of persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities".

(Signed): Valery LOCHTCHININE
Deputy Permanent Representative

ADDRESS

by Mr. A.V. Kozyrev, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, to the ministers for foreign affairs of the CSCE countries and directors of international organizations

Distinguished colleague,

The entire world has recently heard a ringing statement by the Presidents of Russia and the United States of America calling for the observance of the fundamental rights and basic freedoms of the individual as an essential condition for the maintenance of good relations between countries and the strengthening of stability and security worldwide.

This statement is all the more timely since, as the facts show, such an approach is a long way from being shared by everyone. Against the background of the latest provocation in Riga, directed at some Russian officers, the Saeime of the Republic of Latvia, ignoring international opinion and CSCE and CE recommendations, has "on the quiet" passed the most recent piece of legislation infringing the rights of several hundred thousand residents of the Republic - a law on municipal, regional and district council elections which gives the right to vote only to "100 per cent" citizens. Over a third of the country's permanent residents, many of whom were born and have been living in this land for decades, are deprived by the law of the appropriate means to express their will even at the local government level. Denial of the political rights of these people is thus being elevated to the rank of law of Latvia.

Furthermore, this law contains elements which may be said to constitute discrimination on ethnic grounds.

The international community once again has an opportunity to satisfy itself as to the validity of Russia's repeated warnings about the pernicious consequences of aggressive nationalism. Behind a screen of declarations concerning the "threat to the survival of the indigenous nation" and of promises to foster a dialogue between the ethnic communities, encouragement is being given to a political extremism that is capable of leading Latvia into the blind alley of inter-ethnic conflict and social tension, bringing about confrontation with neighbouring States and affecting stability in Europe.

I should like to emphasize in this connection that, despite the clear opposition of the Latvian authorities, the Russian side will continue as before, within the framework of generally recognized international standards and rules, to do everything possible to protect the rights of ethnic Russians in Latvia. All responsibility for the consequences of the passage of the discriminatory law, including the consequences for Russian-Latvian relations, lies with the leadership of the Republic of Latvia and its Parliament.

The law on local government elections is, at the same time, quite clearly a kind of "exploratory step" designed to test the practicability of a policy of ousting the non-indigenous population from Latvia and making it a mono-ethnic State. Coming next is a bill on citizenship which, if approved

in its present form, may reinforce discrimination affecting the rights of the Russian-speaking population in the long term and have consequences that would be difficult to predict.

In this situation the relevant international organizations and the world human rights movement have a duty to speak out and the machinery of preventive diplomacy must be used more actively to stop Latvia from sliding towards conflict.

I trust that, given the seriousness of the situation, you will be able to use your authority and influence in the interests of safeguarding fundamental human rights in Latvia and, ultimately, throughout Europe.

A. KOZYREV

22 January 1994